PROSPECT,

OR

View of the Moral World,

BY ELIHU PALMER.

VOL. I. SATURDAY, *January 14th*, 1804. No. VI.

PHILOSOPHICAL REFLECTIONS.

MEN who have not been accustomed to take a comprehensive view of the nature of things, and the character of moral principle, fear the progress of truth, lest it produce wisdom and virtue to humanize their own country, which losing in consequence its ferocity, would be invaded and enslaved by the vice and folly of their neighbours. They do not reflect upon the irresistible force of trtuth, which, whenever it appears, will remain fixed as a sun, and all the powers of error, aided by art, can never force it below the moral horison, though they may cause occasional fogs and mists, to interrupt, like passing clouds, its meridian splendor. The spirit and essence of this remark are supported by the general history of the human race with some few exceptions, which after all possess more of appearance than of reality. All mankind are agreed in their lamentations of the miseries of human nature, and all do, or must agree, that the only remedy is to be found in the intellectual faculties of man. Under what diabolical fascination, or spell of the demon error, must he act, to consent to chain those faculties, lest their operations produce the increase instead of the remedy of those miseries. In the primitive state of society, men removed many physical ills by the power of intellect, and those ills which may be called moral or ignorant institutions, shall they be perpetuated by prohibiting the use of intellect or exposition of thought, at the very time humanity stands in most need of it. It may be the interest of priests and kings to maintain such a doctrine ; but the best interests of human life require the industrious inculcations of opposite sentiments. Christian theology is replete with maxims and dogmas which present themselves in a formidable manner, and

create in many countries insurmountable barriers to the progress of knowledge and the renovation of the world. So long as the church shall assume to itself the unrighteous and destructive power of declaring what is truth, and what is error, so long will the great mass of mankind be prevented from taking a clear view of those moral principles—of those eternal rules of justice, on which their highest happiness depends. The nature of the human mind and the nature of moral truth has undoubtedly created some obstacles to a perfect uniformity of opinion—but this of itself, while it proves the right of private decision, overthrows the pretended power of the church, and demonstrates that she acts not from principle, but from regard to her own aggrandisement, and the perpetuity of her system. When reason shall have wrought her perfect work, fools will blush and be silent—impostors will disappear, and the earth will become the habitation of human happiness.

Comments on the sacred writings of the Jews and Christians: Genesis, Chapter first.

THERE is a single reflection which forces itself upon every contemplative mind, and which ought to create a strong suspicion relative to the divine origin of the scriptures. It is this; these sacred writings are said to have been given by the creator to man for the special purpose of enlighteniug his understanding, in regard to sacred and interesting truths, a knowledge of which he could no otherwise obtain. Heaven deigned to descend to earth to instruct a wicked and apostate race of men. The ideas communicated were of a supernatural kind—they furnish an explicit direction to weak mortals, concerning the path of religious duty, which they ought to pursue, and their terrestrial travels were to terminate in a triumphant entrance, into the mansions of eternal Glory. In this land of promise, in this celestial and blissful country, these redeemed worms of the dust, are to sing loud Hallelujahs to the Lord forever! The means of accomplishing such glorious objects are said to be so plainly revealed in these sacred books, as to be easily understood by every one, and form a sure guide to the wavering and sinful soul, for a direct ascent to these realms of purity and happiness. But notwithstanding all the pains that God has taken and

the marvellous intelligibility presumed to be contained in this revelation, we find that thousands of comments, and commentators, have appeared for the specific purpose of explaining and rendering intelligible, the already clear and intelligible word of God. The world has been filled with these theological productions from penny pamphlets, up to huge folio volumes, and yet after all, there are found upon the earth more than two hundred different christian sectaries, caviling and quarrelling about the word of God and the true meaning of the sacred scriptures—they have filled the world with their violence—they have drawn their daggers upon each other with savage ferocity—*they have made the earth one great aceldama—one extensive field of blood*, and all this because they could not understand in the same point of view, the plain and simple word of God, revealed from heaven for the express purpose of illuminating a lost and wicked world. Amidst such religious discords, such diversity of ecclesiastical opinions, it will perhaps be pardonable, and even useful to present one more comment for the consolation of agonising and distracted man. It is believed that we have as good a right to tread upon this sacred ground as any of those splendid dignitaries—those divine theologists, who have preceded in the contested race of religious glory.

The first chapter of Genesis commences in the following manner. In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth, and the earth was without form and void.

Chronological accounts of terrestrial origin are involved in clouds of thick darkness—different nations have presented to view such contradictory traditions—such a mass of superstitious credulity, that no certain information, no clear deduction can be drawn from this source. Historical accounts are in their nature exposed to a thousand objections; this remark applies generally—but redoubles its force when the subject includes the origin of the world and the universality of existence. That mind is narrow and extremely circumscribed in its views, which has never reflected upon the character and properties of matter, and the essential connection which subsists between organized and unorganized matter. The theological tales which have descended from former ages, are of little consequence in a case of this kind—the question is philosophic, and to this important tribunal, the inquiry ought to be presented. If in the beginning, *and by the way nobody knows when that was*, God

created the Heaven and the earth, out of what materials did he make them? Was there in the great workshop of nature, a parcel of raw and half worn out materials, from which this beautiful structure could be erected? Or did the mighty power of the mighty God, cause nothing to become something? If so, nothing possesses properties of a marvellous nature, and susceptible of an energetic transformation of which the human understanding can form no possible conception. But the account in this first chapter of sacred writ, says, that the earth *was*, and yet the earth had no form. Now the word was, implies pointedly being or existence—it remains therefore for christian theologians to inform us how a thing can exist without any form, shape, or modification whatever. Whatever does exist must exhibit some external appearance, this is form, and in deficiency of this, there can be nothing within the recognition of the human understanding. If the earth had a form, then the declaration herein contained, that it had no form, is false in fact, and ridiculous in philosophy. The earth is also said to be void—no definite idea can attach itself to this epithet when applied to a thing of positive existence—if applied to non-existence, it includes a contradiction, and becomes equally unintelligible. In either case the opinion of revelationists is placed in a dilemma, from which there seems to be no escape. Perhaps a fanatic mind, that is capable of spiritualizing every thing, can furnish a satisfactory solution; but in the eye of reason it sinks below truth, philosophy, and common sense.

(To be Continued.)

ENCOMIUM ON MR. HOWARD.

I CANNOT name this gentleman without remarking that his labours and writings have done much to open the eyes and hearts of mankind—he has visited all Europe, not to survey the sumptuousness of palaces, or the stateliness of temples, not to make accurate measurements of the remains of ancient grandeur, not to form a scale of the curiosity of modern art, not to collect medals or collate manuscripts, but to dive into the depths of dungeons, to plunge into the infection of hospi-

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tals, to survey the mansions of sorrow and pain, to take the guage and dimensions of misery, to remember the forgotten, to attend to the neglected, to visit the forsaken, and to compare and collate the distresses of all men in all countries. His plan is original, and it is as full of genius as it is of humanity—it was a voyage of discovery, a circumnavigation of charity. Already the benefit of his labour is felt more or less in every country—I hope he will anticipate his final reward, by seeing all its effects fully realised in his own; he will receive not by retail but in gross, the reward of those who visit the prisoner.

THE PROGRESS OF THE CHRISTIAN RELIGION.

(Continued from our last.)

But when Justin was pressed to declare the sentiment of the church, he confessed that there were very many among the orthodox christians who not only excluded their Judaizing bretheren from the hope of salvation, but who declined any intercourse with them in the common offices of friendship, hospitality and social life. The more rigorous opinion prevailed, as it was natural to expect, over the milder—and an eternal bar of seperation was fixed between the disciples of Moses and those of Christ. The unfortunate Ebionites, rejected from one religion as apostates, and from the other as heretics, found themselves compelled to assume a more decided character—and although some traces of that obsolete sect may be discovered as late as the fourth century, they insensibly melted away either into the church or the synagogue.

While the orthodox church preserved a just medium between excessive veneration and improper contempt for the law of Moses, the various heretics deviated into equal but opposite extremes of error and extravagance. From the acknowledged truth of the Jewish religion, the Ebionites had concluded that it could never be abolished.—From its supposed imperfections, the Gnostics as hastily inferred that it never was instituted by the wisdom of the deity. There are some objections against the authority of Moses and the prophets, which too readily present themselves to the sceptical mind; though they can only be derived from our

ignorance of remote antiquity, and from our incapacity to form an adequate judgment of the divine œconomy. These objections were eagerly embraced and as petulantly urged by the vain science of the Gnostics. As those heretics were, for the most part, averse to the pleasures of sense, they morosely arraigned the polygamy of the patriarchs, the gallantries of David, and the seraglio of Solomon. The conquest of the land of Canaan, and the extirpation of the unsuspecting natives, they were at a loss how to reconcile with the common notions of humanity and justice. But when they recollected the sanguinary list of murders, of executions, and of massacres, which stain almost every page of the Jewish annals, they acknowledged that the barbarians of Palestine had exercised as much compassion towards their idolatrous enemies as they had ever shewn to their friends or countrymen. Passing from the sectaries of the law to the law itself, they asserted, that it was impossible that a religion which consisted only of bloody sacrifices and trifling ceremonies, and whose rewards as well as punishments were all of a carnal and temporal nature, could inspire the love of virtue, or restrain the impetuosity of passion. The Mosaic account of the creation and fall of man was treated with profane derision by the Gnostics, who would not listen with patience to the repose of the deity after six days labour, to the rib of Adam, the garden of Eden, the tree of life and of knowledge, the speaking serpent, the forbidden fruit, and the eternal condemnation pronounced against human kind for the venial offence of their first progenitors. The God of Israel was impiously represented by the Gnostics, as a being liable to passion and to error, capricious in his favor, implacable in his resentment, meanly jealous of his superstitious worship, and confining his partial providence to a single people, and to this transitory life. In such a character they could discover none of the features of the wise and omnipotent father of the universe. They allowed that the religion of the Jews was somewhat less criminal than the idolatry of the Gentiles—but it was their fundamental doctrine, that the Christ whom they adored as the first and brightest emanation of the deity, appeared upon earth to rescue mankind from the various errors, and to reveal a *new* system of truth and perfection. The most learned of the fathers, by a very singular condescension, have imprudently admitted the sophistry of the Gnostics. Acknowledging that the literal sense is repugnant to every principle of faith as well as reason, they deem themselves secure and invulnerable behind the ample

veil of allegory, which they carefully spread over every tender part of the Mosaic dispensation.

It has been remarked, with more ingenuity than truth, that the virgin purity of the church was never violated by schism or heresy before the reign of Trajan or Hadrian, about one hundred years after the death of Christ. We may observe, with much more propriety, that, during that period, the disciples of the Messiah were indulged in a freer latitude, both of faith and practice, than has ever been allowed in succeeding ages. As the terms of communion were insensibly narrowed, and the spiritual authority of the prevailing party was exercised with increasing severity, many of its most respectable adherents, who were called upon to renounce, were provoked to assert, their private opinions, to pursue the consequences of their mistaken principles, and openly to erect the standard of rebellion against the unity of the church. The Gnostics were distinguished as the most polite, the most learned, and the most wealthy of the christian name—and that general appellation which expressed a superiority of knowledge, was either assumed by their own pride, or ironically bestowed by the envy of their adversaries. They were almost without exception of the race of the Gentiles, and the principle founders seem to have been natives of Syria or Egypt, where the warmth of the climate disposes both the mind and the body to indolent and contemplative devotion. The Gnostics blended with the faith of Christ many sublime but obscure tenets, which they derived from oriental philosophy, and even from the religion of Zoroaster, concerning the eternity of matter, the existence of two principles, and the mysterious hierarchy of the invisible world. As soon as they launched out into that vast abyss, they delivered themselves to the guidance of a disordered imagination—and as the paths of error are various and infinite, the Gnostics were imperceptibly divided into more than fifty particular sects, of whom the most celebrated appear to have been the Basilidians, the Valentinians, the Marcionites, and in a still later period, the Manichæans. Each of these sects could boast of its bishops and congregations, of its doctrines and martyrs, and, instead of the four gospels adopted by the church, the heretics produced a multitude of histories, in which the actions and discourses of Christ and of his apostles were adapted to their respective tenets. The succession of the Gnostics was rapid and extensive. They covered Asia and Egypt, established themselves in Rome, and sometimes penetrated into the provinces of the West. For the most part they a-

rose in the second century, flourished during the third, and were suppressed in the fourth or fifth, by the prevalence of more fashionable controversies, and by the superior ascendant of the reigning power. Though they constantly disturbed the peace, and frequently degraded the honor, of religion, they contributed to assist rather than to retard the progress of chistianity. The Gentile converts, whose strongest objections and prejudices were directed against the law of Moses, could find admission into many christian societies, which required not from their untutored mind any belief of an antecedent revelation. Their faith was insensibly fortified and enlarged, and the church was ultimately benefited by the conquests of its most inveterate enemies.

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UPON MORAL and PHILOSOPHICAL SUBJECTS, will be delivered by the Editor every Sunday evening, at 6 o'clock, at Snow's long room, No. 89 Broad-Way.

NEW-YORK:

PRINTED and published by the editor, at No. 26 Chatham-street, price 2 dollars per annum, one half paid in advance every six months.